

## Charly O.

**"Your home never leaves you."**



**Charly O., m., born in Turtmann in Canton Wallis, Switzerland in 1928, in Basel from 1948 to 1954 and in Zurich from 1954**

*Where do you come from?*

I was born in Turtmann. I have a brother, three years older than me. Turtmann is in the middle of the Wallis. It's a village built along the cantonal road, which runs dead straight through the village. My parents' house is in the centre. The house is 450 years old; my parents inherited it from my grandparents. My father has never left the village. They were a big family with ten children, two of whom emigrated to America. The others stayed in Turtmann.

*What did your parents do?*

My father began with a little grocery shop. Later on he was able to take over a restaurant. My parents ran that little village restaurant for ten years. In the meantime my mother began trading in furniture. For instance, she'd buy second hand furniture in Lausanne, bring it back to Turtmann and sell it on without restoring it. The customers were people from Turtmann and area, because there wasn't a furniture shop nearby. She ran this furniture business until she died. Once they'd given up the restaurant my parents farmed.

*What memories do you have of your childhood?*

My childhood in the village was a great time. It was like a village from the nineteenth century. There were pretty much only farmers. People met each other on the street all the time; it was the real village life that doesn't happen any more.

*Did you have to help with the farming?*

Yes, of course. We didn't have school all the year round, just for six months, and then six months holiday so that the children could help with the farmwork. There were some jobs, such as mucking out the cowsheds, that one didn't enjoy doing so much. Against that, I did enjoy working with the animals, above all with the horses.

*Which days were the high points of the year?*

The big festival days, such as Corpus Christi, with the Corpus Christi procession through the village. People put up whole altars at various places. There was always a great deal of competition about who had the most beautiful altar. The procession went to these altars. At each practically the same ceremony was conducted. All the village associations took part in the procession, including the military.

*What role did religion play for you?*

We were raised in a very Catholic way, of course, because it's a Catholic area. My mother was a very religious woman who was involved in the church. Every morning we pupils would go from the schoolhouse in a double column to mass in the church. Later on we were altarboys and helped the priest serve mass.

*What role did your family play in the village?*

Because we ran a restaurant, and through my mother's furniture business, naturally we knew lots of people. My mother was something of an original. Even today if I go into a little Wallis mountain village, someone will come up and tell me: "I bought furniture from your mother in the old days." Due to the business we were a bit better off than a farmer or a factory worker. We belonged to the ten better off families in the village. My father was on the village council for a long time.

*What books did you have at home?*

I can't remember there being a bookcase. In our spare time we would sit together. We called it the *Abendsitz*, the evening sitting. We talked and told stories or ghost stories.

*What was the school in Turtmann like?*

You went first to the kindergarten. So when you went to the first class at primary school, you could already read and write, because we didn't play in the kindergarten but had already started learning. Boys and girls were separated from the third class on. Once in a while the teacher would have a bit of trouble with us boys. It was just that we found it difficult to sit in the schoolroom so long, because we were used to being free outdoors.

I left the school a year early, because I had the feeling that the final year wouldn't do me any good. I was able to take the final examination with everyone who had done eight years at school. After that I went to college at St Gingolph's. That was a commercial college that was also attended by the French-speaking students in the village. It was run by a Catholic order, the Frères Maristes. About half the students were boys from the Wallis who were there to learn French. This school was run in a very strict and Catholic way. The schoolyard was surrounded by a three-meter high wall. But the school was a good one, and you could learn a lot there if you wanted to.

*What did you want to become?*

People from the Wallis were renowned as hotel workers, and there were a couple of very famous hotelier families, such as the Ritzes and the Seilers of Zermatt. My parents and I had the idea that I should learn to be a chef and so could later move into the hotel business.

*What kind of relationship did you have with the French speakers of the Wallis?*

A good one. We always had a bit of contact with the neighbouring French-speaking villages, and lots of young men from the Wallis went to school somewhere or other to learn French. We benefited from this later, because we lived near the French border, and we always had some contact, either privately or professionally, with the French speakers.

*How was the relationship with the Italians?*

Many Italians immigrated over the Simplon into the Wallis, mostly around the time the Lötschberg tunnel was being built (i.e., 1912). A lot then stayed in the Wallis, as the many Italian surnames there show. The arrival of the Italians in the Wallis had an effect on the style of the buildings. There are a number of buildings in Turtmann that have a typically Italian style and were built around the time the Italians came to the Oberwallis. The Italians came as labour. Over time some of them assumed important roles in the Wallis; some of them established firms, for instance. One of these was the firm of Dulio-Cerutti. They traded in exotic fruit and pasta. It was always an event when Tullio came from Brig with his Italian products, because he brought a vanload of bananas and oranges and so forth, while we had normally had just apples, pears and nuts.

*What did you do after the commercial college?*

I came back home. I asked myself, what now? Since we were farming by that time, the opinion was: "Now that you can speak French, you could go to the agricultural college at Châteauneuf (near Sitten)." So I registered at the French-speaking agricultural college: two winters and a summer.

After that I could work at home as a farmer, under my parents, in a way, but it didn't work out so well. I heard that the PTT, the Swiss postal service, was looking for people. I took a test in Brig. After that I decided to go to Basel. Six of us, friends from the Oberwallis, travelled together to Basel to work for the PTT.

I had a suitcase with me, probably with a pair of trousers, a jacket, socks and underwear in it. I found my first room in a little detached house right near the train station. I worked in the transit office, which is the office in the middle of the train station where the post is sent on to other countries. I stayed in that office for about five years.

*What was life like in Basel?*

Actually, I found my feet very quickly. I always lived in a room; in those days you couldn't rent a flat. The room cost 35 Swiss francs a month at that time. You belonged in some way to the family where you lived, and quickly felt at home there. But I felt a bit like a foreign worker. I also had this feeling: "I've only come here to work. Apart from that, you don't need me here." I knew I was just there as a worker, and as a foreign worker. That was all.

*Did the people in Basel understand your Wallis dialect?*

I didn't have any big problems with that. I'm pretty adaptable and I soon adapted my speech a little bit. For a short time I was a member of the Wallis association in Basel. Apart from that, we had our regular meeting places. Six of us had gone together and we kept in good contact with each other. We helped each other if there were any problems and spent our spare time together.

Because I was a keen dancer, I would go now and then to the *Thé dansant*, an afternoon event at a dancehall in Basel. It was possible if you worked shifts and had the afternoon off. Lads and girls came there to dance together – swing, mainly. It was at such a *Thé dansant* that I met my future wife. She'd come from a little mountain village in Italy during the war and had stayed. She worked as a hairdresser near where I lived. Because she'd gone to Walenstadt as a child, she spoke the Oberland dialect. We were married in 1955, after I'd finished the police recruits' school in Zurich.

*How was your financial situation while you were in Basel?*

I lived in a pretty Spartan style. I used to eat sometimes in what was called the "milk kitchen", which used to be in every train station. It was very cheap; you could get a lunch for 1.20 francs. I lived in Basel at the French-speaking Pension Gagg for a long time. A meal there cost between 1.20 and 1.50 francs. There were days before payday when you just didn't have any money left. I used to buy a litre of milk and a half-kilo loaf of bread and made it last the two days before payday.

*What happened after the post in Basel?*

The SBB, the Swiss railways, were looking for apprentice conductors. I did this apprenticeship and worked for a year afterwards as a conductor. The wages were 380 francs a month. That was a bit more than on the post, but you had little chance of working your way up to chief guard. And as a single conductor you could be sent to another place at any time. You could be transferred from Basel to Olten within two days, for instance. After two days you had to start the same work again at Olten. And you had to find a room somewhere. So I was suddenly transferred to work in Arth-Goldau. After that I was moved about quite often, and I heard in Zurich that they were looking for policemen here. I took two tests and then I could start at the police recruits' school. Only then did I give my notice in to the railway. The head of Region 2 of the Swiss railways had me go to Luzern. He told me that I should think very carefully about what I was doing because once I'd left I couldn't go back. I thought it over until the very last day. There used to be trains that had letterboxes on them. I put my notice in on the last train I was on.

At the beginning of October 1954 I went to what was called the Blüemlihalle, at the public offices in Zurich. There were fifty of us, all men. To my surprise I met a couple of people I knew, including a conductor from Basel.

My life in Zurich at the beginning was lived almost entirely in the barracks, in offices 1 and 3. The barrack where the recruits lived was on the fourth floor. We slept and were catered for there. We did our sporting activities at Sihlhölzli. Then there was the shooting range.

*What was it like in the police barracks, after living relatively freely?*

At the beginning it was quite strange. It was also sometimes quite difficult to sit through the theory lessons. But in the meantime we had gymnastics, swimming lessons, and shooting, so we got out from time to time.

After the recruits' school we got married in Turtmann. My brother organised the wedding. My wife was very warmly received. Her only problem was, as she said: "People have been speaking to me all day, and I haven't understood a word."

*Where did you settle as a young couple in Zurich?*

Before we married I had applied to about ten different housing associations. I got offers from two, one in Schwamendingen and one in Affoltern. I decided on Affoltern. We had to start very gradually. At the beginning we didn't have all the furniture. For instance, we didn't have a bed; the mattress lay on the floor, and the radio stood on an apple crate. The first daughter was born in 1956, the second in 1960 and the third in 1962. We soon had contact with the neighbours. Most of the neighbours had also come from other parts of Switzerland. At that

time Affoltern was a completely new suburb that had been developed around a little farming village.

*How did contact with the neighbours come about?*

You met in the street, at the butcher's or in small stores. And, since my wife was a hairdresser, she started to cut children's hair. Then word got around. After a while she was hairdresser to half the district's children. That took place privately. Or we went to a family in the evening, and she'd cut these people's hair. Then the neighbours would come too. We integrated very quickly. I soon contacted some clubs. I was in two gymnastics clubs, a passive member of the musical society, and we met people at church too.

*Where were the points of contact with Zurich people?*

Not at many places in our suburb, because most of the people there came from outside. It happened mostly while on duty.

*Which police station did you work at?*

After the recruits' school I was firstly in District 11, and later at the station in Schwamendingen. At that time Schwamendingen was growing very fast. People were swarming into Schwamendingen from all over, and these people, who were from every part of the country imaginable, encountered lots of problems. Then I was in District 7 for a year, in the so-called better areas. After that I switched to the traffic police and was a motorcyclist for four and a half years. Finally I could take an introductory course for the criminal police and after that joined the detectives' office. After that I was a station detective in District 5 for a long while, and then transferred to the commercial police, where I stayed until I retired.

*What sort of problems were you confronted with as a policeman in Schwamendingen?*

Domestic problems, above all. For a young family from a little village in the middle of Switzerland, say, it was a completely new world. They had had an entirely different way of life before and now had to get used to another. Suddenly they had family problems, financial problems, problems with the neighbours. Why? Well, in the country they'd maybe lived in a cottage with a garden around it, and now they were in Schwamendingen in a 21-storey block of flats along with fifty or sixty families of all different origins. That inevitably led to problems. Domestic disputes were pretty much our daily bread at that time. Someone would phone us, for example, and say that a man was threatening his wife with a rifle. You'd go down on your bike and see what was going on. You never knew what to expect. Usually it'd end without any harm being done. You just had to try to sort out the conflict, speak to these people and calm them down. Or you had to take the husband to the station until he'd quietened down. Or preach for an hour. You could feel that you were like a priest sometimes.

*How did you begin to make contact here in Zurich with other people from the Wallis?*

If you wanted to meet people from the Wallis, you went to Wallis restaurants. The most well-known was the Jakobstübli in District 4, a little bar with maybe four or five tables. Mostly you'd meet youngsters from all parts of the Wallis there. I was told of the Wallis club by a former president. The club was based in the Stauffacher restaurant. I went down there. Once I'd found out that other people from Turtmann were in this association, I soon joined. Sometimes I was on the committee, sometimes president too. There were three Wallis associations in Zurich at that time. You also dealt with local government offices when you were organising events. I had a really interesting time while I was on the committee. I also tried to promote contact with the French-speaking associations.

*What's the outlook for continued growth in these Wallis associations across Switzerland as a whole?*

Problematic. Our association, like most of the associations in Zurich, has an ageing membership. Today, when someone comes from the Wallis to Zurich, they aren't in a foreign place any more. They can go home every weekend. When we came to Zurich, we went back home once every six months or year. And we felt we were in a foreign place. It's not like that any more.

Earlier, people from Wallis who had no job would also come into the Stauffacher. They just came to Zurich and hoped to find work here. The Wallis club even wrote to various construction firms and recommended people from the Wallis as workers. They could stay with a friend and eat for free in the Stauffacher until their first wages came through. Then they'd settle their bill on the first payday. So the club also had a social role. The Zurich Wallis club was known of in the Wallis too. Every now and then poor families in the Wallis would approach the club and the Zurich Wallis club supported families there financially.

*Does the question of returning to the Wallis ever arise for you and your wife?*

No, since I had my family and my job, this question hasn't arisen any more. The chances of finding a similar job in a similar position there were slim. Also, we just never discussed it. But I still have very good contact with the village today. I'm also active in various organisations there.

*The question of going back hasn't arisen since retirement?*

No, because the children and the grandchildren are here, and we're very close to them. We're well integrated here through them too, and we like living in Zurich.

*Who do you feel you are today: a Walliser, a Züricher, or a Swiss?*

Of course, I consider myself to be one hundred percent Walliser. If I ever lie in bed at nights and dream or mull things over, I still feel that I'm only here in Zurich temporarily – just to work, and that I will go back again sometime, even though that is unlikely to happen. Home just doesn't leave you alone. It's quite a long way away, but here somehow nonetheless.

*What is needed for the different culture and language groups in the city of Zurich to get along together?*

Zurich has a very large proportion of foreigners, which is not, in and of itself, any problem. But one has to break up the various ethnic groups and be ensure that no ghettos develop. One shouldn't force these people to integrate, but apply a gentle pressure to see that the members of the various ethnic groups don't collect together too much. Through this the desire to integrate is lost. I also see this problem amongst people from the Wallis. In fact, it's no great trouble for them to integrate. But if these people are always with their own kind, they don't integrate. Integration takes place when one lives and mixes with people from other groups and gets to know their culture.

The language is also a barrier. If you don't speak German here, you'll never integrate properly, because you can't communicate with the neighbours. One should seek to help people, especially those who come to us in Switzerland later in life, so that they can learn the language. With the younger people it's no problem, because they learn the language fast, and so they're rapidly integrated.

